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C O N F I D E N T I A L BOGOTA 004662

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PTER](#) [CO](#)  
SUBJECT: FARC TALKS COMING SOON? SOME THINK SO

Classified By: Ambassador William B. Wood  
Reasons: 1.4(a), (b), (d)

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Summary  
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¶1. (C) Peace talks with the FARC are possible in the next few years, according to a group of ten (mainly leftist) Colombian observers. Their surprisingly optimistic outlook is based on a conjunction of factors: military pressure; gains by the democratic left; narcotrafficking difficulties; international condemnations; organizational and generational shifts; and legal carrots and sticks. The commentators said President Uribe has the skills, clout, and desire to coax the FARC to the table in his second term. End Summary.

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Military Balance  
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¶2. (C) The military balance has shifted significantly in the COLMIL's favor, according to a number of these experts. The number of public security forces (both COLAR and police) have increased by 50% since 2002, with an emphasis on expanded presence in rural areas where the FARC is focused. Colombian budget increases and U.S. assistance have yielded significant improvements in weapons, equipment, intelligence, training, expertise, discipline, morale, and assertiveness. As a result, under the Plan Patriota program the COLMIL has retaken territory formerly ceded to the FARC as well as control of vital routes of communication, mobility, and supply. In the view of National Reconciliation and Reparations Commission (NRRRC) chair Eduardo Pizarro, Colombia is now a formidable FARC opponent.

¶3. (C) The counterpart to COLMIL expansion is FARC deterioration. A vital blow was the 2003 loss of its former safe haven (despeje) as a secure base of planning, training, and central command. Academic Fernando Cubides saw this as the FARC's big mistake, a "strategic error," and a turning point in the conflict. It forced the FARC to decentralize its forces. Demobilized FARC commander 'Nicholas' explained how the battle paradigm has changed: previously the COLMIL would arrive, attack, and leave; now they fight deeper into terrain, stay in place, and hold their ground. Pizarro listed broken lines of command, communication problems, indiscipline, lower morale, increased desertions, and higher burden of militia recruitment as significant FARC challenges.

Recent FARC attacks have been few and aimed at isolated and vulnerable units caught off guard; its sights have shifted to softer targets, i.e. defenseless civilians and economic infrastructure, in a reflection of its reduced offensive capability. In March FARC leadership ordered fronts to conduct aggressive attacks to disrupt legislative elections, but the result was paltry. Security analyst Alfredo Rangel said spikes in FARC violence will only be last gasps before dialogue and simply attempts to gain a stronger bargaining position.

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The Democratic Left  
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14. (C) Leftist trends in the region, and the Polo Democrático Alternativo's increased support in Colombia (including the election of Bogota Mayor Lucho Garzon and Valle Governor Angelino Garzon) will probably encourage the FARC to engage in peace talks, according to former Peace Commissioner Daniel Garcia Pena. Ex-guerrilla 'Nicholas' made the same point about Garzon and Gaviria, explaining that the worst slap in the face to the FARC is to show that the left can have a political voice by democratic, nonviolent means. It is an affront to the FARC, said 'Nicholas,' that those like Gaviria who have opted for the legal route are closer to power after four years than the FARC has come in 44 years.

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Cocaine Trafficking  
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15. (C) Cocaine trafficking reportedly accounts for the majority of FARC funding, and it is commonly cited as the motive that will keep the FARC fighting indefinitely. Pizarro highlighted the FARC's principal dilemma on drugs: narcotrafficking is the lightning rod which attracted the interest of the U.S. Plan Colombia's aerial spraying and interdiction have increased the economic costs of narcotrafficking, while Plan Patriota's incursions into coca growing zones have inflicted greater guerrilla casualties. Pizarro said recent U.S. indictments of 50 top FARC drug traffickers will reignite the old debates within the Secretariat about the correctness of drug trafficking.

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Interlocutors suggested the FARC leadership may be willing to cast drugs aside in pursuit of their more primary political aims. Former EPL guerrilla Alvaro Villaraga said coca has had a big influence on the FARC, yet leaders are very pragmatic about it as merely a business. NRRC member Ana Teresa Bernal recounted that in talks at Caguan during the Pastrana administration (septel) the FARC submitted a proposal to the GOC for cessation of its coca cultivation and for guerilla assistance in eradication.

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Isolation  
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16. (C) Pizarro pointed out that previously the FARC could point the finger at the other armed actors for human rights violations (especially their arch-enemy paramilitaries) to defend its own actions. With the others gone, the context is no longer one of multilateral war with impunity on many sides. Isolation puts FARC violence in greater relief. Now 90% of atrocities are attributable to the FARC, Pizarro says, holding up a "mirror of barbarity" to the guerillas and creating a "dramatic dilemma of legitimacy." Not only is the FARC's self-image (and morale) hurt, said Pizarro, but so is its image internationally and nationally. The E.U. has now joined the U.S. in declaring the FARC a terrorist organization, curtailing overseas sources of support and sympathy. Popular support within Colombia is at its nadir, estimated around 2-3%. In 2006 elections guerilla-endorsed candidates lost even in FARC stronghold towns. In Pizarro's view, trends such as these which are unfavorable to the FARC

are accordingly favorable to negotiations.

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Organizational Fault Lines  
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¶7. (C) Former President Pastrana's Peace Commissioner, Camilo Gonzalez, described the FARC Secretariat as "fanatical Marxists" and asserted that middle cadres are doctrinaire too, but he said the troops may not be so committed to the insurgency's ideological aims. Urban recruits may be politically aligned but are inexperienced and untrained in warfare; the adjustment to mobile rural battle can be a shock to their initial resolve. Altogether the base of the FARC's pyramid is less stable and more disconnected physically and philosophically from the leadership. Pizarro highlighted the generational theme, too, pointing out that leaders of the FARC's founding days at Marquetalia are dying. Moreover, the composition of the Secretariat is shifting: its seven members are now dominated by those of urban origin (five) rather than rural campesinos (two). The resistance of the past forty years, says Pizarro, is a campesino concept. By contrast the FARC's city-born, highly educated ideological leader Alfonso Cano is now 55 years old; in Pizarro's view, Cano does not want to die in the jungle.

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Legal Carrots and Sticks  
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¶8. (C) Interlocutors said the Justice and Peace law would not, by itself, bring the FARC to the table. Many said FARC leaders are unwilling to serve any jail sentences at all, given their conviction that their motivations were pure as the 'army of the people.' Moreover, past experience (septel) shows that the FARC expects a peace process and associated legal framework crafted uniquely to their needs. Rangel qualified Justice and Peace as "marginal...more of an obstacle than a facilitator." Views were mixed on the impact of U.S. extradition filings. Pizarro said "the threat of extradition is an extremely high cost," and therefore a valuable bargaining chip in negotiations. Most commentators

saw a GOC commitment not to extradite those sought by the U.S. as a potential concession by the GOC to wring compromises from the FARC.

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Betting on Uribe  
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¶9. (C) Drawing analogies to El Salvador and Guatemala, Pizarro stressed that success in peace processes in Latin America has been typically achieved by right-wing governments. No one negotiates with the weak, he said, only with the strong. Villaraga cited a Colombian precedent: the very authoritarian military government of Rojas Pinilla in 1953 demobilized some 15,000 liberal guerillas who were precursors to the FARC. Gonzalez commented that when one talks to the FARC one sees that they despise the Colombian left, academics, Liberal candidate Horacio Serpa, and politicians, while they respect power and symbols of power. Even Liberal party leader and ex-President Cesar Gaviria conceded that the FARC despises the left more than Uribe for being traitors. Rangel concurred, saying that guerrillas hate the political left as apostates.

¶10. (C) Rangel stressed that any process of negotiation with the FARC would need immense political support. In his first term Uribe used his substantial personal capital to soften the GOC stance and make a series of landmark offers to the FARC. The most important of these was the acceptance of a key FARC demand (see septel) for a constitutional assembly (constituyente) to follow peace talks. With the ELN, Uribe's administration yielded on its demand for a total truce before talks, becoming more pragmatic in order to make progress. On the subject of humanitarian exchange of hostages with the FARC, Uribe has similarly reversed his prior positions with

respect to temporary 'safe haven' in the pursuit of results. In his offers to the FARC, Uribe has shown "immense generosity," according to Rangel. By all accounts this is because Uribe definitely wants negotiations with the FARC. As Pizarro said, this is the way Uribe wants to pass into history.

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Why Not Wait to 2010?  
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¶11. (C) Some argue that the FARC has survived for forty years and can survive another four under Uribe, awaiting a softer left-leaning administration in 2010. The FARC is expert at holding out and hiding out, helped by dense jungles and frightened rural populations. Ana Teresa Bernal took this perspective: "The FARC defines itself in terms of resistance. Their characteristic is prolonged popular war. Four more years of Uribe does not mean an end to the FARC."

¶12. (C) Others interviewed, however, said the FARC could neither 'lay quiet' nor sustain another four years of active conflict without attempting negotiations. "Four more years of (Uribe's) Democratic Security will be too costly for the FARC," forecast Pizarro; "we are entering the last stages of the war." Ex-insider 'Nicholas' added that the FARC has been in a phase of accumulation for the past four years; it needs to pass to a more active phase of confrontation or it will atrophy. Fading into civilian life for four years would disperse the ranks of hard-won recruits. Al Qaeda expert Bruce Hoffman asserted that terrorist organizations must make continued attacks to be relevant. A guerrilla movement without actions, without visual and visceral attacks, does not get attention.

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